

# **Joint Statement On Education By State, BIA**

(Editor's Note: The following is a joint release from Warren I. Tiffany, Assistant Area Director (Education), BIA, and Cliff R. Hartman, Commissioner of Education, State of Alaska.)

**NATIVE EDUCATION** and rural schools have been focal points of serious public questioning recently. Both the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Alaska Department of Education schools, their quality, and their curricula have been under fire. So has the availability and quality of secondary schooling for students from small, remote, predominately Native Alaskan villages.

**THE QUESTIONING** is good. It is encouraging that the general public is awakening to the critical needs of rural Alaska. The signs point toward an increased willingness at both the state and federal levels to devote more resources to the education needs of the state. Unfortunately, the criticism reveals a lack of understanding of the problems, and of the progress and direction which the BIA and the Department of Education are making, cooperatively.

**CONFLICT** between the BIA and the Department of Education is what the public apparently sees. Not so! Actually, the opposite is true. An excellent cooperative working relationship between the Alaska Department of Education and the Bureau's educational staff has built up. Programs and policies of the two agencies are openly discussed. Actions regarding curricula, enrollment, school transfer, and construction are carried out mutually. Daily inter-agency contacts are commonplace. Full cooperation and mutual understanding can be documented in

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the meetings and reports of the Governor's Committee on Rural Education in Alaska.

THE STATE of Alaska has the basic responsibility of education for all its citizens. This involves the complete transfer of BIA operated schools to the State's control. This is being done with deliberate speed. More than 60 schools have passed from Bureau to State control. Ten were transferred last year; more are being prepared for transfer soon.

"MUTUAL READINESS" is the principle being followed in the school transfer process. There are three parties to most transfers: The BIA, the State of Alaska (or borough), and the local community (or in the case of Mt. Edgecumbe High School, the Native people of the entire state). The principle of mutual readiness insures that no damage or disruption will result to the education program as a result of the change in administration, and that the schools' patrons will be consulted and involved.

SEGREGATION in Alaska's schools is an immensely complex issue. Transfer of schools from BIA to state control is in no way part of the solution. In actual fact, the Bureau's schools are neither more nor less segregated than comparable State-operated schools. Both agencies operate day schools enrolling all of the students in the community. Both operate boarding schools capable of enrolling non-Native as well as Native students. If policy changes are required to shift students to other schools, they are equally possible under BIA,

or State school operations. A greater freedom of school choice is currently being offered to both students and their parents. Long-range construction programs of both the state and federal governments are designed to provide greater opportunities for secondary students.

THERE ARE some differences between the schools operated by the BIA and those operated by the Alaska Department of Education. Basically, however, they are all good, sound schools. If each could adopt the best qualities of the others, they would be greatly improved, but the resources needed to make improvements are not available.

THE UNIQUE educational needs of a people with cultural and language differences, geographic isolation, and economic handicaps such as those in Alaska are enormous. So are the costs! Alaska now spends \$1,000 per pupil each year in the rural areas—twice the national average. It is still not enough!

THE RESULTS are still encouraging, despite serious drawbacks. Students from remote Native communities generally progress at a lower rate than do the students in our modern affluent communities. This should come as no great surprise. What is unique is that over 95% of all rural children, ages 6-18, are in school. Furthermore, although the BIA's Mt. Edgecumbe school enrolls only 16% of the state's high school students, 30% of all Alaska Native students in colleges and universities are Mt. Edgecumbe graduates.